

The King Must Die - Mark 8:27-38

There are times when correctly identifying things are not that important. For example I can't identify the many different types of shades of pink there are. Looking at the colours up there I could not tell you which was Lavender Pink, which was Persian rose, which was Amaranth, which was Salmon Pink. And to be honest it doesn't particularly bother me that I can't tell the difference. However there are many times in our lives when it is important to be able to correctly identify something.

I remember my Dad telling me a story about when he was younger. Now the key thing to know about my father for this story is that he is really short sighted, so without his glasses he can only see clearly to about 20cm in front of his face. On this particular day he had just had a shower and therefore didn't have his glasses on, he had his towel on and was walking back from the shower to his room when he noticed something on the floor in the doorway. Without his glasses he had no idea what it was, with his vision all he could identify it as was a black blob. Thinking it was a sock or something he was about to just kick it out of the way, when he thought he saw the black blob move, so he thought he better bend over to get a closer look at it. So getting down on his hands and knees he got close enough to correctly identify the black blob and also saw how important it was that he identified this black blob, because this is what he saw when he bent closer. There is a world of difference between a sock and a funnel web, there are times when it is very important to correctly identify something.

Throughout Mark's gospel so far, he has been inviting you to identify who Jesus is. We have had a number of sermons in our series on Mark so far that have helped us identify different aspects of who Jesus is. And in today's passage it comes to a head. Jesus finally asks the disciples who do they think he is? Jesus has given them plenty of clues in the previous 8 chapters and he wants to see if they can correctly identify who he is.

Jesus eases them into it. He asks them who do people say I am. The answers they give may seem strange, but they reflect answers given about John the Baptist a few chapters earlier. People can clearly see that Jesus is powerful. Most recently it reminds people of what John the Baptist who was also preaching about the Kingdom of God. Others remember back to the Old Testament where God had promised that prophets and in one place Elijah were still to come to preach to Israel. This is what the crowds thought about Jesus, but what about his disciples, the guys who have been alongside Jesus for a number of years now.

So Jesus asks them directly, he wants to know who they think he is. He wants them to commit to what they have seen and heard.

And Peter, probably the most outspoken of the disciples answers, "You are the Messiah."

This is a big deal, and is actually an impressive leap of faith from Peter. Although Jesus has been healing, preaching and showing his power over nature, he hadn't yet shown all the characteristics of what the Messiah was to do. Yet Peter says You are the Messiah, Peter shows extraordinary faith. And Jesus response is interesting as well, he first warns them not to tell anyone about him. This is in fact what Jesus has been doing throughout Mark when mainly demons have been identifying him as he does his miracles. To understand why Jesus might do this, we need to look at 2 key things. What the understanding at the time was about the Messiah, and what Jesus says about himself as the Messiah.

Do you remember the beginning of Marks gospel? He says in chapter 1 verse 1 that this is "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. Mark starts his gospel by saying Jesus is Messiah, but after verse 1 til now there has been no further mention of Jesus as Messiah. You see many of the Jews in Jesus time had a certain type of Messiah in mind when that word was mentioned. To give you an idea of what many Jews were thinking let me read a song that was known at the time.

"Behold, O Lord, and raise up unto them their king, the son of David, at the time known to you, O God, in order that he may reign over Israel your servant. And give him strength, that he may shatter unrighteous rulers, and that he may purge Jerusalem from gentiles who trample (her) down to destruction... With a rod of iron he shall shatter all their substance; he shall destroy the godless nations with the word of his mouth."

Do you see the military type expectation of their king, their messiah. But there's a problem. The Old Testament references to Jesus as a military King are correct, they just aren't about his first coming, they were about when he comes back the second and final time. The problem was that many of the Jews had this military type King in mind and expected this kind of Messiah to come now and destroy the Roman rule. And the disciples would have shared many of these views as well. So when Peter declares Jesus as Messiah, Jesus warns them not to start spreading that further. Not because it was wrong, but because it not the full story. Jesus then goes on to give the full story about the Messiah, he starts teaching the disciples one of the key reasons he has come this time. He teaches them that he, the Messiah, must suffer, be killed and rise again.

This is a big shift in the book of Mark and a shift in Jesus teaching. Up until this point Jesus has not mentioned his upcoming death and resurrection. The question up until now had been Who is Jesus? But now it shifts to What is Jesus here to do? Also notice that Jesus spoke to them plainly about this. Previously, Jesus had been speaking a lot in parables, now Jesus wants them to clearly understand this key

idea. It is a key turning point in Mark's gospel, from this chapter onwards Jesus tells the disciples 2 more times that he will suffer, die and rise again, from here on in Jesus is focused on what he must do in Jerusalem. Jesus here is showing the disciples that he is to be the King who will suffer, die and rise again.

But Peter, the disciple who took the leap of faith by proclaiming Jesus as Messiah, now just as spectacularly stuffs up. In Verse 32 we see Peter start rebuking Jesus. Now before we get too critical of Peter here, we need to remember that Jesus saying that he would suffer and die is a really radical statement. It was a radical statement then and has been a radical statement throughout history. For Peter and the Jews to say that God would be able to die was unthinkable. Throughout the years many other religions have criticised Christians for believing that our Creator of the world, the eternal God was also a man who was crucified. As Pauls says in 1 Cor 1 "we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles." It was unthinkable that Jesus the Messiah was going to suffer, die and rise again. This indeed was a stumbling block to Peter who could only see Jesus as the powerful miracle worker, the one who was strong enough to overthrow the Romans and restore Jerusalem, and be the King of God's people. He saw what he wanted to see in Jesus.

It's something that we humans do, quite easily, we could even do it subconsciously. Let me give you an example. There was a test where people were shown 2 different images at the same time, one in each eye and asked what they saw. The images were a bull fighter and a baseball player. When shown to people of different nationalities It was interesting that most of the Spanish viewers saw the bull fighter while the Americans saw the baseball player. Because of our mindsets, what we know, means we view things a certain way. And Peter saw the Messiah as a powerful triumphant King and when Jesus changes that image he got upset and tried to rebuke Jesus.

And it's amazing to see Jesus reaction to this. We might think, Jesus would gently say, you're not quite right Peter or say it's all right Peter everything will work out. No. He says GET BEHIND ME SATAN! Jesus reaction is extreme. You see correctly identifying Jesus and understanding that he is a suffering King as well as a conquering King is as important as identifying the difference between a sock and a funnel web. I'm serious. If you don't understand that Jesus, God's son, the Messiah, had to suffer, die and rise again, then you don't really understand who Jesus is and what it means when you say I believe in Jesus. That's why Jesus reacts the way he does.

There are key things about Jesus, about who he is and what he has done that are critically important that we understand. They are critically important as they affect the basic principles of Christianity and our salvation. I think the Apostles Creed that we say here in church does a pretty good job of summing them up, and you will note that it includes the lines "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was

crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again."

What do you believe about Jesus? It is important to understand who Jesus is and what he came to do. When I hear people making Jesus into what they want, sometimes even with good intentions to make him seem more appealing to non-Christians, they pick and choose the bits they like about Jesus, and they make Jesus into just a nice person, less challenging, so that they can remove any claims that Jesus might have over their life. As Jesus says it becomes more about human concerns than Gods concerns. Do you adjust who Jesus is? Do you make him in your own image? As we follow Jesus we must do more than get Jesus title right we need to know what he has done and we need to obey and follow him.

Now that Jesus has explained to the disciples that he will suffer he also starts telling the disciples what this will mean for them as disciples of a suffering messiah. He tells them that they will need to take up their own crosses and it makes sense doesn't it? If Jesus was going to suffer for preaching a certain message why would his disciples be treated any different if they were to preach the same message. Jesus says "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." There are 3 commands in there, a disciple must deny themselves, must take up their cross and follow him. So what does this mean?

I am going to firstly say some things I don't think it means. Denying yourself here is not about going on a monthly period of fasting, its not about saying I wont watch TV for a week or moving away to live in a monastery somewhere. Thats denying stuff, its not denying self. And while it may be helpful to do give up these things occasionally it's not what Jesus is talking about here. Also Taking up your cross is not dealing with everyday troubles, nor do I think it is dealing with illness or sickness. Those things can be trials that we go through in life and they may indeed help us grow in our faith, but I don't think that is what Jesus is talking about here.

I think all 3 commands are actually related. That to follow Jesus, means to deny yourself and to deny yourself is part of taking up your cross. Let me try to explain a bit more. If we are denying ourselves, I think it means fighting our sinful human nature and desires and focusing on God. And that means that we can all have individual challenges we need to face. Self denial takes shape in many ways. For some it may meaning leaving job and family as the disciples have done. For the proud it means renouncing the desire for status and honour, for the greedy it means renouncing the appetite for wealth. The complacent will have to renounce the love of ease. The fainthearted will have to abandon the craving for security from the world. On it goes. You know best what hinders you from giving your whole life to God. We each are called to deny ourselves and to obey Jesus. I think if we

do this we then start standing out from society. In today's consumerist society where the key focus is "What's in it for me" it should be easy for us to stand out by denying ourselves. If we do this it means we are listening to Jesus words and are not ashamed of them, if we do this it will most often mean we face misunderstanding and persecution from the world as they find this type of self denial foolish and challenging to their own lifestyles. This persecution becomes our cross to bear. This is how we take up the cross and follow Jesus, taking up our cross is about the struggles we face from others as we obey Jesus and follow him. Do our work colleagues know we're a Christian, do other parents from school? Can they see it in the way you talk, live. If they do it should attract them to God or it will often attract some level of persecution as their way of life is challenged by Gods radical way of living. A good way of gauging how well we are denying ourselves and following Jesus is how much we are attracting people to Jesus or are attracting some level of persecution.

The final verse of the chapter could be for some people a worrying verse to read. It speaks about being ashamed of God, then he will be ashamed of us when Jesus returns. We might think about those times when we've passed up an opportunity to share Jesus because we were embarrassed and we're worried that this verse means that we are out of heaven and no longer saved. Well I can assure you that it doesn't mean that. You know how I know. Well all 12 of the disciples standing there right then were not standing there when Jesus was crucified. In fact the disciple who Jesus says he will build his church on, Peter, actively denies Jesus 3 times, clearly embarrassed, ashamed and scared about knowing Jesus. So please don't see that last verse that way. Yes, Its not good if we do those things but just like Peter if we do, we can say sorry, confess and Jesus will forgive us.

What I think it does mean, is that if we live out our lives saying that we are Jesus disciples, but don't listen to his word, pay no heed to him as our Lord and make no effort to deny ourselves and take up our cross, then how much are we really his disciples, then we can expect to have Jesus ashamed of us when he comes again.

Understanding who Jesus is, identifying him as a suffering Messiah a suffering King is as important as differentiating a sock from a funnel web spider. And that understanding should lead us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him.

Amen